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## The Escape

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## The Escape

When he turned to her that night she did not rebuff him. She could afford to do nothing that would make him suspicious. Afterward, she turned away, tears of humiliation and rage burning behind her eyelids, unshed. Eventually, she fell into a troubled sleep.

During the night, the baby woke up screaming. She got up and lifted him from his crib in the other bedroom, cradling his small body close to hers and saying a prayer of gratitude for whatever small discomfort had woken him. Here at last was her chance to get the passports from the desk downstairs! The night before, she had not had a chance to secure them as her husband had followed her about like an evil shadow, his uncanny sixth sense apparently warning him that something was wrong. When she peered cautiously into their room before descending the stairs, he did not stir and seemed to be fast asleep. He had never got up at night if one of the children cried out so she was not surprised that he continued to sleep undisturbed.

Stealthily, she crept downstairs with the now pacified baby in her arms. She tried to think of an excuse in case the man got up and asked why she was going downstairs. She had it—she could say she was going to get the baby some milk or water.

Gliding into the study, she got the three passports from the desk drawer where they were kept and tucked them into her nightdress under the baby's warm body. She almost smiled as a wry thought crossed her mind. What excuse could she give if he were to wake up and find the passports there? She stopped this thought in its tracks, deciding to focus on what she had to do. She had to get back upstairs, put them out of sight and hope that he would not check the drawer before she left next morning. Remembering her alibi, she went into the kitchen and got a bottle of water for the baby.

She moved up the stairs as silently as she could, trying to avoid the creaky parts of each stair. As she went up her eyes fell on the chair in the living room she had been sitting in one evening when he came in from playing football with his friends....

The children were happily playing close to her, and she was finishing the last row of a doily she had been crocheting for weeks in her rare bits of free time. Two of the matching pieces were displayed on the table near her as she worked on the last one. They were very pretty and she liked looking at them as she worked on the last one.

The door opened and her husband came in.

"Have the children been bathed?" he asked. No kiss, no word of greeting. Just this harsh question.

"Not yet," she replied. "I am just finishing this and then I will bathe them."

"You better put that down and bathe them now or else..." he said menacingly as he loped up the stairs to the shower.

What did it matter to him what time she bathed the children, she wondered sourly. It's not as if she were slovenly or did not look after them well. For once, she refused to obey him though her breathing got quicker and she was deathly afraid. She kept on stolidly looping the thread onto her needle, working rapidly.

Ten minutes later, having had his shower, he came down the stairs with a towel round his waist, strode up to her and ripped the doily from her hands, literally tearing it to shreds. He did the same to the other two on the table. Then he gave her a stinging slap across the face that sent her halfway across the room. The children started to scream. Tears streaming down her own face, she picked them up, took them upstairs and got them in the bath. She did not know it then but it would be years before she could work on a piece of crochet again and even when she did she was never quite able to regain the deep pleasure and peace she used to feel when doing it...

Her eyes moved away from the chair. She had loved it when they first bought it but now she could hardly bear to look at it.

She went into the guest bedroom, lifted the mattress and deftly slipped the passports—hers and the children's—under it. It was not a very imaginative hiding place but it was the best she could think of right now. With a bit of luck she could get them into her purse or bag tomorrow morning without him seeing. By now the baby was sleeping again so she laid him gently in his crib, praying that the rest of the night would pass quickly.

Next morning, when she woke up, her husband was not in the bed beside her. Maybe he was outside doing some chore and she could get the other papers—birth certificates and her marriage certificate—she needed from the desk in the study downstairs. There had been no time to search for them last night. She went downstairs hopefully. There was no sign of him in the kitchen or the living room. She walked into the study, feeling triumphant, but was brought up short as she saw him sitting on the couch right beside the desk!

"I wondered where you were," she said truthfully.

He frowned at her but said nothing. She retreated into the kitchen. That man must be psychic, she thought. She had a moment of panic. Maybe he had searched the drawer and found the passports missing? She took a deep breath and went on with the breakfast preparations. She had to keep calm.

When she finished making the breakfast, she went and woke up the children, then bathed and dressed them. They were unusually fussy. Maybe they sensed the tension in the house. She tried to keep them quiet, thinking desperately that if they carried on like this, he might decide to keep them home that day instead of sending them to the babysitter. He was already on vacation, and today was her last day at work before her summer vacation began. She had to take them with her today or she would not get another chance for the rest of the summer. He would not let them out of his sight. He would take her and the children everywhere with him. She was surprised he was even allowing her to drive to work today. Normally, he hardly ever allowed her to drive, though she loved driving, and had been driving since she was sixteen. As he had explained to her, he was the man, and driving was a man's business, not a woman's.

Eventually, she got the children fed and ready to leave. Could she risk putting more clothes into their bag? No. She would keep everything as normal as possible. She packed only the one change of clothes for each child that she normally did. For herself she did not dare put anything extra into the bag. She would have to go with just the clothes she was wearing. She retrieved the passports from under the mattress and tucked them into her handbag. He must not get those passports or he would grab the children and take them to that distant southern island he was from and she would never see them again.

By this time, she was almost trembling with nervous exhaustion but knew she had to hold herself together. She dressed herself quickly and took the two children downstairs.

“I’m going now,” she said.

“O.K.” he replied. He seemed to have recovered slightly from his earlier black mood.

She walked outside with the baby in her arms and the three-year-old toddling along beside her, holding on to the hem of her dress as he usually did. She put them into the car and got behind the wheel. Her husband stood at the door of the house watching them.

She got into the car and sat behind the wheel, her heart thumping. The children were still fussy. For God’s sake, she thought, be quiet or we will never get out of here today. She spoke soothingly to them knowing that if she snapped at them, it would only make things worse.

The engine sputtered weakly and died when she turned the key in the ignition. She tried it three or four times and stopped, afraid she would flood the car with gas. Not today, she thought despairingly. The old car was acting true to form. Many a day, she and he had pushed it home with the children laughing gleefully inside, thinking this was some wonderful game. The confounded thing seemed to spend more time with the mechanic than on the road.

Her husband came out of the house. What now, she thought. He moved leisurely behind the car. He was never one to rush. He did not need to, she thought bitterly. She did just about everything that needed to be done while he sat around reading the newspaper or smoking a cigarette or playing innumerable board games with his friends while she provided them with drinks and food and looked after the children all at the same time.

“Put it in second,” he instructed. She was familiar with this routine and quite expert at it. He was going to give the car a push start. The irony of it made her almost smile. But she was too tense.

As the car picked up speed, she quickly let out the clutch and pressed down on the accelerator and the car bucked into life. She even managed to wave at him gratefully as they sailed away down the road, her heart doing a flip-flop in her chest and the little ones wailing in the back seat. She felt almost sad as she looked at him fading away into the distance in the rear-view mirror. Suddenly she realised that the next day was his birthday.